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Short Paper

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Today's CIOs face a host of perplexing and conflicting demands. Learning how to embrace these complex paradoxes is akin to learning the art of spinning plates in opposite directions. Early insights from our interview-based study reveal that CIOs are embracing their role-related paradoxes by developing a "plate-spinning mindset," i.e., a mindset that helps CIOs spin multiple metaphorical plates in opposite directions. In this paper, we inform practitioners what a plate-spinning mindset entails, and how to develop such a mindset.

Introduction

Senior leadership roles are fraught with conflicting tensions (Tushman et al., 2011), and the CIO role is no exception. Emerging research from industry and academia suggests that in the last few years, the CIO role has evolved from 'ambiguous' to 'paradoxical' (Kappelman et al., 2017; Kohli and Johnson, 2011; Peppard et al., 2011; Thatcher et al., 2011; Weill and Woerner, 2013). Contemporary CIOs increasingly wrestle with multiple conflicting or paradoxical demands that can also polarize how other senior executives perceive this role (Deloitte, 2018). To better understand these paradoxes, and how contemporary CIOs are coping with them, we interviewed twenty-nine CIOs (see Appendix for details on how the study was conducted). Based on insights from the initial stages of our data analysis, we explain three interesting phenomena. First, why has the CIO role shifted from ambiguous to paradoxical. Second, which conflicting pressures or paradoxes are working on the CIO role, and finally, how can CIOs develop a plate-spinning mindset to embrace these paradoxes.

The genesis of our exploration comes from two sources – first, the wealth of information created by the examination of CIO role in the last decade. This information clearly suggests that the role is being increasingly barraged with complex and conflicting demands, and recommends that CIOs carefully *choose* their role priorities. Second, there is an emerging thought among leadership gurus that as senior leadership roles become more and more perplexing, leaders may need a different mindset to navigate the conflicting tensions of their roles (Smith et al., 2016). For CIOs, it would mean having to evolve from the simplistic world of "either/or" role choices, to developing a more complex "both/and" role mindset (Leidner and Mackay, 2007; Smith et al., 2016). We call it the "plate-spinning" mindset, which metaphorically communicates spinning multiple plates in opposite directions. Developing a mindset of spinning plates in opposite directions represents CIOs learning the complex art of embracing their role-related paradoxes. Initial results of our study show that developing such a mindset helps CIOs embrace their complex role-conflicts.

Why CIOs Face Crippling Paradoxes in their Roles

Early results of our study suggest that a key reason contributing to CIO role paradoxes is the pervasiveness of technology itself. Widespread strategic use of technology has *strengthened* the CIO role, but almost paradoxically, it has also marginalized the CIO role. It has created in a deceptive ease-of-IT-use assurance among other functional heads, who are increasingly taking key technology-related decisions without consulting the CIOs. Indicating this trend, recent industry reports suggest that some chief marketing officers (CMO) now have higher IT budgets than their CIO counterparts (Gartner, 2015-2016). To make matters more challenging for CIOs, such decisions may also jeopardize the organization's overall data integrity and information security. Think of a CMO opting for a cloud-based marketing analytics application, without consulting the CIO. Later, the CMO realizes that the data policy of the organization prohibits marketing data to be stored on the third-party servers.

Paradoxes Facing the CIO Role

Some paradoxes are clearly visible in how organizations are redefining their expectations of the CIO role. Deloitte's global survey of more than 1,400 CIOs shows that CIOs are increasingly served both *operational* (e.g., improve service performance and operational efficiency) as well as *strategic* goals (e.g., fuel business growth and innovation), with conflicting ramifications (Deloitte, 2018). These trends are also supported by a near equal distribution of their budget allocations – 57% for IT-operations and 43% for business innovation and growth.

Results of our study revealed that most paradoxes exist in multiple layers. For example, a close observation of CIO's operational and strategic goals reveals interesting contradictions not just between the nature of these goals, but also *within* each goal category. Operational goals demand CIOs to not only reduce service costs, but also provide exceptional service quality. In our interviews, CIOs spoke openly about this 'reduce-cost-yet-improve-service-quality' paradox. CIOs also reported how the efficiency-centric image of their role required convincing their chief financial officers (CFO) about the fiscal justification of providing business-critical services, such as information security. In other words, contrary to the operational, cost-cutting expectations of their role, CIOs are increasingly required to improve enterprise risk posture by setting-up costly cybersecurity and risk-management infrastructure.

Paradoxes also exist within CIOs' strategic goals. CIOs are increasingly being asked to become business-strategy partners and develop a futuristic digital strategy for their organizations (Arandjelovic et al., 2015; Milovich, 2015; Weill and Woerner, 2013). Yet, many CIOs still lack a seat in the C-suite, limiting their access to the organization's strategic thought process (Gartner, 2018). The absence of CIOs in strategic discussions also reinforces the archaic perception among other CxOs, of a CIO's cost-centric, service-provider image. This increasing presence of a strategic agenda, yet the absence of opportunities for a meaningful strategic dialogue with their peers, invokes yet another role paradox for the CIOs.

Interestingly, we also uncovered paradoxical overlaps between the operational and strategic aspects of the CIO role. For example, we realized that even the operational aspects of CIO role could have strategic ramifications. As an illustration, although establishing the cybersecurity infrastructure is considered an *operational activity* for the CIOs, yet a security major breach may have *strategic after-effects* for the organization, such as negative publicity and loss of stakeholder trust. This scenario brings out multiple conflicting tensions faced by the CIOs. First, despite the strategic ramifications of an information security breach, it is still considered an operation activity, and CIOs are under pressure from the CFOs to create an 'low cost' (yet secure) infrastructure. Second, although CIOs are accountable for this activity, yet given that the security infrastructure extends into other departments, CIOs have limited control over its efficacy outcomes. And, even if the infrastructure may be breached outside the IT department, the CIO role may still take the hit (Gross, 2014). It is not surprising that in a global survey, more than 50% of CIOs felt that their role was a scapegoat for other departments, and felt blamed for the mistakes of other departments (IDG, 2016). Grappling with such contradictory pressures invokes the image of a CIO spinning multiple plates in opposite directions.

How to Develop a Plate-Spinning Mindset

In his recent interview with Harvard Business Review, Ram Charan, one of world's foremost advisers to CEOs and boards, advises that senior leaders facing complex paradoxes "can't be wimps" and need to "make the tough calls" (Merino, 2003). Early insights from our interview-based study reveal that CIOs are making the tough call of reconciling and embracing their paradoxical demands by developing a plate-spinning mindset. CIOs are increasingly realizing that the key challenge to reconciling their paradoxes is to address *both* conflicting obligations simultaneously in the short-term to enable long-term success (Smith et al., 2016). The "plate-spinning" mindset can help CIOs achieve that. Such a mindset embodies adopting and pursuing five bold self-affirmations, each of which conjoins a pair of apparent paradoxes. Each self-affirmation has underlying sets of guiding behaviors, contemplations, and practices that will help CIOs develop the plate-spinning mindset. Pursuing each self-affirmation conveys the sense that when a self-affirmation is perfected by diligently following the underlying behaviors and practices, it will help CIOs spin the inherent paradox to their advantage. In other words, these self-affirmations, and their underlying behaviors and practices, will help CIOs not only reconcile, but embrace their role paradoxes.

By embracing the conflicting tensions of their roles, CIOs begin to see the contradictions not as inconvenient or problematic, but as *essential* and *enriching* features of a senior leadership role. This further facilitates their adoption of five self-affirmations, resulting in an upward spiral of growth and self-betterment. To that extent, these self-affirmations, and the resulting plate-spinning mindset, could be considered means to achieving a goal, rather than being a goal themselves.

Self-Affirmation I: "I am Both a General Officer and an IT-Brand Ambassador"

As an IT-brand ambassador, CIOs must be parochial enough to present and defend their IT vision to their colleagues in the C-suite. It enables them to ensure that IT-related discussions are included in the C-suite meetings, and that key IT issues are discussed as strategic not functional issues. Paradoxically, this is best achieved by CIOs who think like a general officer of the organization. As one of our respondents mentioned:

"You have to create a balance between not relinquishing your agenda to everyone else's, and recognizing that ultimately everybody's agenda is to achieve organizational success."

Most CIOs are deeply rooted in the IT function, which prevents them from becoming general officers. As explained in the Table, CIOs perfecting this self-affirmation need to, among other things, reach out to their C-level colleagues with compelling value propositions. As one CIO explained:

"I would often meet with them and ask them – 'Let's talk about your goals and how we can get you there. Let's talk about some new ideas that might be useful to you.' So, getting in the minds of others and communicating with them in the way they want to be communicated with."

Perfecting this self-affirmation will enable CIOs to rethink their IT agenda as a general officer, without compromising their role as the IT function head. This mindset was succinctly conveyed by a CIO:

"While I have this horizontal view of the company, my role is very clear – to deliver technology solutions for the corporation and have the right processes to do it. Making sure that we are advancing the corporate strategy."

Self-Affirmation I: Recommended Behaviors and Practices
✓ Give a strategic spin to your IT agenda. Do this in three steps.
✓ First, define the "IT brand" in context of your organization. This includes defining the 'brand meaning,' 'brand promise,' and 'brand culture'. When communicating with the C-suite:
o Build the IT brand by conveying the three aspects of the brand with enthusiasm and passion
✓ Then, become a master translator between the IT function and other business units. This will give you street credibility as a general officer. To achieve this objective:
o Develop a deep, horizontal, process-level understanding of how your organization works.

> o Use that deep understanding to be a *differentiator* as well as an *integrator* – first, identify different business areas and then identify what common threads (processes, roles, goals, pressures) integrate these areas.
> o Finally, understand how technology can be integrated into these common threads to create compelling value.
> ✓ Third, communicate this value proposition to open-up your CEO and your peers to the possibilities of technology helping them achieve their strategic goals.
> o Embed the IT brand promise in your communication as a general officer.
> ✓ Keep your technology-related communications simple.
> o Accept and respect other's lack of technology literacy.

Self-Affirmation II: "I am Both an IT Problem Solver and a Business Solutions Enabler"

This self-affirmation best embodies the conflicting "operational" and "strategic" aspects of the CIO role. Contemporary CIOs should have the ability to both *service an IT problem* as well as *enable business solutions*. Servicing an IT problem entails providing effective and efficient solutions to the organization's IT-related problems. As the table below explains, enabling a business solution, on the other hand, involves offering innovative technology-enabled solutions for achieving short-term and long-term organizational goals. This paradox was highlighted by a CIO:

"We could either become order-takers or dieticians. (As dieticians), we can work with the people to understand what is best for them based on my own technology portfolio. And, how can we advance their cause by the application of these technologies."

Perfecting this self-affirmation bring two key benefits. It helps CIOs reconcile the operational/strategic paradox, and it helps CIOs align their IT strategy with their corporate strategy. As one CIO explained:

"Having a (solution-enabler) mindset helped (me) develop the ability to align the IT strategy with the business strategy."

Harrah's Entertainment (now Ceasers Entertainment Corp.) is a case in the point (Loveman, 2003). Their IT strategy, which focused on using analytics extensively to identify their 'true customer,' was aligned with their corporate strategy of building exceptional customer loyalty. This alignment helped Harrah's outplay its competition and show strong profits. This exceptional feat was jointly achieved by the then COO and CIO (Pogash, 2002).

Self-Affirmation II: Recommended Behaviors and Practices

✓ To **Service an IT Problem (IT Problem Solver)** – clearly understand your organization's capabilities; how these capabilities interact, i.e., what is the workflow; where are the pain-points in the workflow; how to simplify the workflow using cost-effective IT services.
   o This entails 'getting out of people's way'.
   o Create IT solutions to make their everyday activities more effective, making them more productive in their jobs.
 	
✓ To **Enable a Business Solution (Business Solution Enabler) -** develop an eye for looking at things differently. Get creative, and think of ways to position organizational capabilities in a different tapestry using IT; look beyond how these capabilities typically interact and use IT to create new pattern of interactions between organizational capabilities
   o For example, ask yourself, "How can I use organizational capabilities (e.g., strong relationships with suppliers) for competitive advantage (create a dashboard that streams real-time data from suppliers to enhance supply-chain visibility)?"
   o This entails 'getting in people's way' by challenging their current work-concepts, make them think beyond their mundane activities to come up with innovative ways of doing things, possibly using IT.

Self-Affirmation III: "I am Both Functionally Autonomous and Business Reliant"

This self-affirmation addresses yet another interesting paradox that CIOs struggle with. As technologists, CIOs typically tend to rely on their core skills that they have developed on their own, during their toughest times. These "solo strengths" usually include their breadth and depth of technical knowledge, problem-solving skills, vendor-management skills, and their ability to manage complex technological projects. Going solo typically enables the CIOs quickness and agility of project execution and gives them the luxury of knowing exactly what they are doing.

But, in the new world, as CIOs are called out of their comfort zones to solve complex organizational problems, they must embrace the paradox of both "going solo" and simultaneously relying on the organization's business team. This entails seeking and valuing opinions of other business leaders in the organization, sometimes even relying on their contributions to solve complex organizational problems, while maintaining the mindset of moving solo when quick agility is needed. CIOs who have perfected this self-affirmation reap both - the quick benefits of relying only on themselves, and the comprehensive benefits of relying on others. A plate-spinning CIO explained this further:

"It was very frustrating to slow down my pace, just so I could move with the rest of the (business) team. Early in my career, I would often sit in the meetings wondering, 'how can I make them see how quickly this could be done'..... (Later) I realized the value of moving together."

Another CIO shared an example of one of the behaviors underlying this self-affirmation, when working with teams within the IT function:

"I respect my team, so I don't micromanage. But, if I need to get engaged in something, either I decide to do it, or if they ask me to get engaged."

Yet another CIO highlighted the paradoxical benefits of this self-affirmation, when working with other functional heads:

"Working closely with others, observing them every day, helped me understand how they protect their turf. It also helped me defend my own autonomy, while being a productive team-member."

Self-Affirmation III: Recommended Behaviors and Practices
✓ Learn to accept and respect your own inherent contradictions, which will inform you about your own "autonomy." In other words, it will help you understand how your own contradictions will facilitate or hinder your individual workstyle.
✓ Then, practice accepting and respecting others for their inherent contradictions.
✓ Spend time understanding what strengths and capabilities others bring to the table. Use this information to align goals and roles. For internal teams, be specific in communicating the goals to be accomplished and role expectations.
✓ Practice respecting others' expertise by relying on them to achieve common goals
✓ Another key indicator of respect for others is to adjust, within reason, your own pace with the pace of people you are relying on

Self-Affirmation IV: "I am Both Politically Savvy and a Straight Talker"

The straight-talking aspect of this self-affirmation is best illustrated by one of the CIOs:

"I have no agenda. I have a passion for doing this, so I do it."

But, being a undiluted straight talker typically earns the technologists a reputation of being difficult or uncooperative. As one CIO commented:

"Another name for a CIO is CI-No."

The onset of IT outsourcing challenged the straight-talking nature of many technologists. CIOs had to develop vendor-management skills, which included the ability to take vendors' words and promises with a grain of salt. As one CIO mentioned:

"I had a very tough time learning the lesson that what is said and what is meant is rarely the same."

As the world of CIOs expands further, it has increased the breadth and depth of CIOs relationships with internal as well as external partners, customers, vendors, and even competitors. This self-affirmation helps CIOs step out of their comfort zone, and better manage their new ecosystem of professional relationships. Being politically savvy helps CIOs understand the needs and expectations of others, and utilize this knowledge to achieve their functional and organizational goals.

As a caveat, in their enthusiasm of achieving their personal and organizational goals, CIOs may practice political savviness excessively. But, this is fraught with the danger of sacrificing one's integrity, which, as a respondent cautioned, *"once lost, is very difficult to regain, at least in the same professional setting."* So, CIOs trying to perfect this self-affirmation need to develop trustworthy partnerships – horizontally and vertically as their safety net. Being a straight talker will help develop these partnerships.

Self-Affirmation IV: Recommended Behaviors and Practices

- ✓ Focus on building trust and not simply communicating. If your professional relations lack trust, your communication will remain peripheral and ineffective.
- ✓ Identify the motivations guiding the words and actions of your colleagues. Also identify the pressures weighing on them, and provide them the IT support to ease those pressures. Begin with helping the CEO ease his/her pain-points.
  - o Do this by being non-defensive about technology and determining what is in the best interest of the whole organization.
- ✓ Deal with facts: have fact-based discussions (and not role-based or people-based), consciously avoid emotional or relational biases.
- ✓ Accept mistakes without blaming the technology, but include facts where needed.
- ✓ Keep your communications with the C-suite simple and non-defensive.
  - o People like flexibility – so when presenting IT solutions, offer alternatives, backed with facts.
  - o Offering alternatives also makes people feel involved in decision-making. They will walk away from the conversations feeling good about the outcomes.

Self-Affirmation V: "I am Both Functionally Decisive and Business Open-Minded"

The underlying idea behind this self-affirmation is that being technologists, CIOs typically have definitive opinions on technology-related issues. But, they cannot afford the luxury of having conclusive opinions when participating in business strategy discussions with other business-domain experts. As one CIO explained:

"The world of technology is clean and defined, but the world of business strategy is messy, and I had no clue of the rules (of this world). You bring your best information to the room and it may get tossed aside for genuine reasons. Slowly you learn not to take it personally."

CIOs trying to perfect this self-affirmation consciously practice thought-patterns that are best exemplified by this comment:

"There are a lot of smart people in the room. And people have ideas...I think its very important to listen to them to understand their point of view, what they want to do, and then internalize it to maybe change your mind. I mean, it's being able to believe that you are right, and yet being able to change when someone else says that maybe you are not."

Once perfected, this self-affirmation helps CIOs participate in key discussions, whether within the IT function or outside, with a decisive-open mindedness. One of the CIOs highlighted the sentiment of this self-affirmation:

"Based on my experience, I know I am mostly right (in a functional decision-making situation). But that doesn't stop me from seeking others' opinion. So, one of my strengths is knowing that I am typically right about things, and another strength is knowing that I am not perfect."

Self-Affirmation V: Recommended Behaviors and Practices
✓ Practice being open and willing to accepting other right solutions. There can be more than one right solutions, and some solutions may be 'more right' than yours.
✓ Practice reminding yourself that the information and opinions you bring to the table do not define who you are. If these are questioned, it does not mean that you are questioned.
o   Be resolute as well as ready to change, if better information is presented
✓ Practice deep listening, i.e., when listening to someone, try not to prepare a response in your mind while they are talking. Listen to people with complete availability and intent. Deep listening allows the mind to completely focus on understanding the intent and contextual implications of information being presented. Over time, deep listening will help you hear 'more of what is being said.'
✓ Practice inquisitiveness, which can also help develop open-mindedness.

Conclusions and Expected Future Progress

As our data analysis progresses, we expect to identify more paradoxes. We also expect to uncover more underlying causes of these paradoxes. As a result, we expect to identify more paradoxical plates that CIOs have to spin, and recommend more bold self-affirmations for CIOs to help them develop the plate-spinning mindset. We would also conduct analysis to identify if some self-affirmations could help spin more than one paradoxical plates, or if there are any compelling inter-relationships between these self-affirmations. Early analysis does indicate this possibility. It seems that self-affirmations II, III, IV, and V could be related to self-affirmation I. For example, perfecting the 'functionally autonomous as well as business reliant' self-affirmation could also help CIOs perfect the 'general officer as well as IT brand ambassador' self-affirmation. This idea of overlapping self-affirmations will be developed further.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Research design

The research was conducted following the interpretive grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Research began by a careful reading of CIO-related literature (academic and practitioner reports) to identify general issues regarding the CIO role. Literature over the last few years indicated that the nature of CIO role had evolved from ambiguous to paradoxical. This observation aligned with the recent leadership studies that propose increasingly conflicting nature of senior executive roles, and the need among senior leaders to develop a new mindset. This helped us frame the broad conceptual themes to guide our inquiry:

- Identifying the complex paradoxical challenges shaping the present-day CIO role
- Identifying the new mindset that contemporary CIOs need, to successfully manage these paradoxes

To explore these foundational themes, 29 detailed interviews were conducted with current and recently retired CIOs of organizations headquartered in the United States, UK, Japan, and India. The retired CIOs were also active as business consultants and provided helpful insights regarding the evolution of the CIO role. Table 1 describes the sample by industry.

Table 1: Industries Represented in this Study			
Airlines	1	IT Services	1
Automotive	3	Transportation & Logistics	1
Business Consulting	6	Manufacturing	1
Defense	1	Mobile Services	1
E-Commerce	2	Non-Profits	5
Entertainment	1	Pharmaceutical	1
Financial Services	10	Technology Hardware	3
Healthcare	3		

A mix of unstructured and semi-structured data-collection protocols was used. A general list of questions was developed based on the two conceptual themes. It included a mix of descriptive as well as structural questions. Interview questions evolved based on the content of previous interviews. As needed, respondents were contacted again to seek clarification on their responses. Interviews typically lasted between 90 – 120 minutes. All interviews, except four, were recorded, and detailed notes were taken during the interviews. Each interview was transcribed upon completion.

Data analysis began immediately upon the completion of the first interview. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of simultaneous coding and analysis. So, each incident from data was coded in as many categories as possible, and simultaneously compared with the previous incidents coded in each of those categories (Glaser, 1965). In situations of confusion, memos were recorded to gain logical clarity.

Open, axial, and selective coding was performed (Mills et al., 2014). To begin with, detailed, open coding helped generate the preliminary categories (for example the individual dimensions of each self-affirmation)

and their properties. Some preliminary categories were also identified from the notes taken during the interviews. Many of these categories were In Vivo codes, For example:

Comment: "I mean try not to be brash but I had no problem being decisive, and I learned it over time."
Code: "Decisive"
Self-Affirmation: "I am both functionally decisive and business open-minded."

The remaining categories were identified based on their intent. This was followed by axial coding to form relationships among the categories. Current and emergent categories and concepts, and their properties, were posted on a large 48" x 36" poster to enable creating inter-connections between categories. These interconnections helped group categories together to form clusters that helped identify patterns. As the overall theoretical theme of a 'plate-spinning mindset' begin to emerge, along with the five self-affirmations, and their underlying behaviors and practices (recommendations), additional data were collected using a "snowball" approach to probing, where future respondents are contacted through existing ones. We continued interviewing until saturation was achieved in all categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

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